



# Using Military to Counter Growing Latin American Crime; Short Term Gain but Long Term Concerns

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In the past five years, there has been a marked increase in crime in Latin America. Last year the United Nations claimed Central America was the most dangerous non-combat region in the world. During this same period, governments throughout Latin America have attempted policy initiatives to stem the rising crime rates but so far to little success, except in Colombia. Most countries are resorting to the use of military forces in support of law enforcement to stop rising crime trends. So far, this tactic has shown little success. A new approach is needed. The key to Colombia's success has been combining the use of the military while simultaneously developing a robust training and vetting program for the police force and for the judiciary. However, in Colombia's case, the military is used counter terrorism, not mitigate growing crime rates. This difference is a lesson that can be used by other countries in the region. Expanding the role of the military will only expose regional militaries to the same temptations current police forces are exposed to and taunt them with the possibility of riches they will never be able to afford on their salaries. The key is not putting more professionals in the way of criminal groups who will be able to continuously outspend governments. We need to support the region in building more professional police forces, hardening their judicial institutions and developing societies that allow increased migration from one social sphere to another through intense universal education that goes through secondary school.

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Latin American and Caribbean alarming crime growth is directly related to a combination of the vast amounts of money available in the drug trade and social mores and financial constraints that make it difficult for



the poor to break out of their social sectors. Almost 200 tons of cocaine are smuggled through Central America to North America every year, for a 2008 value of about \$38 billion at destination.<sup>1</sup> The value of the drug flow rivals that of the legitimate economies of the nations through which the drugs pass.

The increase in drug trafficking through Central America over the past several years has brought with it an increase in crime throughout these transit countries. Central America has the highest murder rate of any noncombatant region in the world. Governments are losing out to the drug traffickers in terms of being able to exercise sovereignty over their territories. Central America in particular is at risk because it sits between the source zone for cocaine and the largest consumer base, the US. Some 88% of the cocaine destined for the United States transits the Central America/Mexico corridor, about 50% along the Eastern Pacific (in fishing boats) and 38% along the Western Caribbean coast (in go-fast boats). Its geographic position between source and consumer is a key variable in the weakening of democratic institutions there and allowing criminals to exercise more and more power.

The Central American crime situation distinguishes itself from other regions in the world in at least two respects: the extent of its exposure to drug flows which I already discussed but also in the level of violence in its societies.<sup>2</sup> Central American countries report some of the highest recorded intentional homicide rates among all countries for which reliable data are available. Perceived lawlessness can provoke a nostalgia for authoritarian rule. It can incite the public to demand the use of the military in policing, or to support the roll back of hard-won civil rights. The 2004 Latinobarometro notes that the citizens of Central American countries (as well as the Dominican Republic) prioritize public order over civil liberties, in contrast to the rest of Latin America. A large share of Central Americans polled have not rejected the idea of a military government, and many feel a coup d'état would be acceptable in circumstances of state corruption or where crime has been allowed to grow out of control. In Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala, crime is considered a bigger problem than unemployment according to those polled in the 2009 Latinobarometer survey.<sup>3</sup> Nicaragua still has unemployment as number one and Honduras for 2009 cited other issues (likely the challenge to the presidency they were facing) as the number one issue but both had crime as a top three issue.<sup>4</sup> On average, 38% claim to have been a crime victim and 19% feel that crime is the most important problem they face.<sup>5</sup>

The overwhelming dominance of the Central American transit corridor is a recent occurrence which also contributes to the growth of crime in that region. In Central America, the countries rank as follows, from safest to most dangerous: Costa Rica; Nicaragua or Panama; Guatemala and El Salvador. <sup>6</sup> Honduras was not mentioned in the above study but clearly it should be with Guatemala and El Salvador. Most of the data suggests that El Salvador and Guatemala stand alongside Jamaica, Colombia and South Africa/Swaziland as the most violent countries for which figures are available. <sup>7</sup> In Guatemala, close to 96% of crimes go unpunished.<sup>8</sup>

The type of violence or conflict we are seeing in the region, especially Central America, results from ‘cycles of violence’ that have infected communities as victims vent their rage and become perpetrators. A cycle ensues where conflict introduces small arms and results in the learning of practical and psychological skills required to use the weapons. Next the perpetrators learn the skills of smuggling and how to develop or use covert organizations. <sup>9</sup> The cycle continues unless a sea change is introduced that stops the cyclical turn. We are currently in the frenzy of churning violence and that sea change is needed.

The role of the drug trade is also evident in the murder figures. In Guatemala, the three provinces that have murder rates higher than the province of Guatemala (the seat of Guatemala City, by far the largest urban area in the country) are Escuintla (on the Pacific Coast), Petén (site of the so-called “airplane graveyards”, where drug traffickers scuttle their craft), and Izabal (on the Caribbean coast, hosting the two largest ports in the country). <sup>10</sup> Izabal and Petén are about 70% rural, and all three high-violence provinces have been implicated in drug trafficking. <sup>11</sup> In 2006, the former President claimed that he no longer controlled those regions but that they were controlled by drug traffickers.

And murder rates are increasing. The most pronounced example is Guatemala, which increased almost 45% from 4,507 homicides in 2004 to 6,498 homicides in 2009.<sup>12</sup> The prosecution rate however, has remained between 2-3 %.

### **Central America’s homicide rates.**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Rate</b>
Honduras	67
El Salvador	61
Guatemala	45
Belize	31
Panama	24
Costa Rica	11

Source: Latin News, SEP 2010; US is 5.5 per 100,000

The out of control crime trends leads to the perception that the police are incompetent which undermines public confidence in the government as a whole. Even worse, in many areas of this region, the police are viewed as actively contributing to the crime problem. Survey data shows the police are regarded as the most corrupt sector of government in Guatemala. In 2009, almost 80% of Hondurans viewed politicians as the most corrupt, followed by public officials, police, members of Congress, judges and ministers.<sup>13</sup>

Studies have found that the distribution of wealth in a society is more significant than raw poverty in predicting violence levels.<sup>14</sup> Wealth disparities provide criminals with a justification (addressing social injustice) and an opportunity (wealth to steal) for their activities. Central America is one of the most unequal regions in the world. Four of the seven Central American countries rank among the world's most unequal in terms of income distribution. Globally, there are only 18 countries for which data are available that show a Gini index of 52 or greater. Seven are in sub-Saharan Africa, eleven are in Latin America, and four of them are in Central America: El Salvador (52), Honduras (54), Guatemala (55), and Panama (56). Thus, four of the seven Central American countries rank among the most unequal in the world. There are no figures for Belize, while Costa Rica (50) and Nicaragua (43) are less extreme, though still highly divided between rich and poor.

For this region to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty and violence, development is needed but there cannot be development without security. Investors do not put their money in places where the rule of law does not prevail. A recent study found that security costs and losses due to crime absorbed nearly 10% of gross domestic product (GDP) in Central America.<sup>15</sup> Other figures say it is closer to 14% while in the US and Europe it is closer to 4%. Furthermore, skilled labor does not reside in countries where personal safety is at risk.

Crime and corruption are derailing attempts to address the polarization of wealth. The threat of crime hampers the poors' efforts to better themselves, as they structure their activities around avoiding victimization. Trust among countrymen is lost, and with it goes social cohesion. Cynicism about the difficulty inherent in succeeding within the law breeds further insecurity, and whole regions can find themselves locked into a downward spiral of victimization and social disinvestment.

The primary responsibility of the state is to ensure citizen safety. When the state fails to establish basic internal order, it loses the confidence of the people. When civil servants and elected officials come to be viewed as part of the crime problem, citizens effectively disown their government. Whatever role the state might play in development is seriously challenged.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Latin America, Transparency International's 2009 Perception of Corruption Index lists ten states as having under 5 (out of a potential score of 10) for corruption. Five countries in the region were under 3.<sup>18</sup>

**Wavering democrats** 1

*Which of the following statements do you agree with most? %*

	Democracy is preferable to any other type of government					In certain circumstances an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one				
	1996	2001	2006	2007	Change since 2006	1996	2001	2006	2007	Change since 2006
Costa Rica	80	71	75	83	8	7	8	9	5	-4
Uruguay	80	79	77	75	-2	9	10	10	10	0
Bolivia	64	54	62	67	5	17	17	18	14	-5
Venezuela	62	57	70	67	-3	19	20	11	14	3
Ecuador	52	40	54	65	11	18	24	21	13	-8
Dominican Rep.	na	na	71	64	-7	na	na	21	21	0
Argentina	71	58	74	63	-11	15	21	16	20	4
Panama	75	34	55	62	7	10	23	19	13	-6
Nicaragua	59	43	56	61	5	14	22	14	10	-4
Mexico	53	46	54	48	-6	23	35	15	14	-1
Colombia	60	36	53	47	-6	20	16	16	12	-3
Peru	63	62	55	47	-8	13	12	20	22	2
Chile	54	45	56	46	-10	19	19	13	21	8
Brazil	50	30	46	43	-3	24	18	18	17	-1
El Salvador	56	25	51	38	-13	12	10	15	20	5
Honduras	42	57	51	38	-13	14	8	12	17	5
Paraguay	59	35	41	33	-8	26	43	30	36	6
Guatemala	50	33	41	32	-9	21	21	35	33	-2

Source: Latinobarómetro

## A warning for reformers

Nov 15th 2007

From The Economist print edition

Developing countries cannot afford to spend as much per capita as rich ones on security or police, justice, and corrections. Figures for law enforcement budgets and judiciary are hard to find but figures for military expenditures show a pattern that is likely followed in other security areas. Wealthier nations spend between two and four times as

much as the countries in Central America do on their military. See table below.

Country	Military expenditure as % of GDP 2008
Guatemala	.4
El Salvador	.8
Nicaragua	.7
Belize	1.1
US	4.3
France	2.3

#### SIPRI Database

With regard to policing levels, several countries in Central America show poor police to public ratios, including Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.<sup>19</sup> Numbers are sporadic for police per capita throughout the region but they show much lower levels than in wealthier nations. For example Costa Rica has .37 police officers per 1,000 people;<sup>20</sup> El Salvador has a about .02 police officer for 1,000 people<sup>21</sup>; in Guatemala there are roughly .1 police officers for 1,000 people.<sup>22</sup> The US has about 2.3 per 1,000.<sup>23</sup>

These governments are not able to increase the number of national police officers to meet the growing crime threat.<sup>24</sup> The countries' small police forces, meanwhile, are poorly trained and paid, especially when matched against drug traffickers who often have sophisticated weapons, a great deal of money and are unencumbered by bureaucracy and laws.<sup>25</sup>

Individuals and companies in the region rely on private security firms for personal security. Security firms have grown 9-10% per year since the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> In the United States, there are 1.09 million private guards; 1 guard for every 280 people; in Guatemala, a country of 13 million people. There are between 100,000 to 150,000 guards (the exact number is not known since many of these companies do not register with the authorities); one guard for every 85 to 130 people.<sup>27</sup> The



combined number of state and federal police in the United States is 883,600; Guatemala has roughly 22,000 active police officers.<sup>28</sup> Private security personnel now outnumber police in nearly every country in Latin America.

(Note that even the United States has more guards than police according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>29</sup>

Other sectors of the justice system are also challenged by resource and management issues. Judges in many countries in the region are popularly believed to be subject to financial or political influence. Lack of police and prosecutorial capacity results in low conviction rates. For example, 2005 figures suggest that murderers in Guatemala had about a 2% chance of being convicted. In such a climate of impunity, the deterrent effect of the law is minimal.<sup>30</sup>

To bolster police numbers, the governments in Central America that have a military routinely order them to support law enforcement efforts. They are being used as a force multiplier, engaging in joint operations, performing routine patrols of high crime areas and acting as prison security guards. Despite superficial similarities (uniforms, rank structures, guns), however, the jobs of the military and the police are different. The military is trained to defeat enemy forces and control territory. The police are charged with working with the public in solving problems. The police can play a vital role in identifying and helping to solve local crime problems, but they can only do so if they are demilitarized. They must engage with and know their communities, and be trusted by them.<sup>31</sup> They must spend a good deal of their time sorting out the myriad non-criminal community conflicts that ultimately manifest themselves as crime.<sup>32</sup> They must convince the public that it is worthwhile reporting crime and that the outcome of doing so is preferable to taking matters into their own hands. In the 2009 Latinobarometer poll, the armed forces was considered the most respected institution behind the church and the media.<sup>33</sup> Police only had 34% approval, judiciary 28% and the armed forces 45%.<sup>34</sup>

It is true that today the military is better disciplined (and therefore better respected) than the police in some countries. The police in this region are highly militarized in their approach to law enforcement.<sup>35</sup> They need more community outreach training. The process of democratizing these police forces is the process of making them less like the military. Seconding the military to these more military-style police forces will not help the police forces move in the direction needed to build strong democratic institutions.

One would assess that since these governments are increasingly using the military as support to law enforcement, that the militaries in these countries are larger than the police forces. This is not true. In every country in Central America that has a military force, that force is smaller than the police force.



In Guatemala, in April 2006, a “citizen security squad” was created and 2,400 military personnel assigned to joint patrols with the police, contrary to their role as defined in the constitution. It would appear that these bodies are intended to be permanent. Half of the funds for these troops are drawn from the police budget, and the military budget was increased to cover the balance. Soldiers have also been used for other internal security functions, from crop eradication to guarding public transport. In response to vigilante activity in May 2006, 11,000 troops were deployed, including members of the elite former counterinsurgency force, the Kaibiles. Honduras has also deployed military units to patrol the streets.

While the soldiers are not given full police powers, the idea is that they act as a force multiplier, on the premise that the added numbers will enhance the deterrent effect. Saturation patrols might suppress street crime in a narrowly defined geographic area for a period of time, but they do nothing about the causes of that crime.

Some analysts say that deploying the army to tackle drug violence has made it vulnerable to the same corruption infecting the police.<sup>36</sup> The



countries in the middle of the crime war-- Mexico and Central America—need specially trained and equipped counter-narcotics units to effectively fight organized crime at the federal, state and regional levels. This solution would decrease the risk of continuous recourse to military action to the detriment of effective community policing, inter-agency cooperation and efficient inter-state judicial and law enforcement cooperation.<sup>37</sup>

Also it gives the military powers and respect that could lead to authoritarian rule. In Guatemala, with the highest murder rates in the region, 42% of those polled in the 2009 Latinomarmeter poll claimed they would support a military government under some circumstances.<sup>38</sup> The same report says Guatemala is the most vulnerable to a coup based on three specific questions that judge coup vulnerability.

### **Way Ahead**

The way to turn back these paralyzing crime rates is to develop better trained, equipped law enforcement, the judicial programs needed to prosecute the criminals and the social programs needed to help the poor

break social barriers. Using the military in support of law enforcement on a continuing basis misuses the military's skills. It also threatens the professionalization of these forces who have shown continued progress in depoliticization and professionalization. Any plan to mitigate crime must be multi-pronged and should use the process established in Colombia as the blueprint. First, the population must be convinced that they are at war with the criminals. This takes a brave charismatic leader who has international support. The country then needs to simultaneously develop a vetted, professional police force and strengthen its judiciary. Arresting criminals without prosecuting them will have no impact. New social programs that make education compulsory and work towards narrowing the divide between rich and poor must be instituted. The military can be used as a stop gap measure in limited capacity until the above actions start showing success. The deadline should be no more than one year. For the US, this will take increased fiscal support to FBI and State Department for training law enforcement professionals and prosecutors and judges, and other judiciary personnel.

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## Notes

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Ms. **Renee Pruneau Novakoff** assumed her current position upon appointment to the Defense Intelligence Senior Level in July 2010. Prior to this assignment, she served as JIOC-SOUTH senior analyst and in several divisions in USSOUTHCOM's intelligence directorate as senior analyst. As the command's senior intelligence analyst, Ms. Novakoff is responsible for strategic analysis and oversees operational and tactical intelligence production and collection. She is a primary briefer for senior delegations to the command on intelligence matters. She has been at the command for ten years and has performed as an intelligence analyst for over 25-years. She started her career as a signals analyst at the National Security Agency. She then worked for nearly fifteen years in various analytical assignments at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Some highlights from her career there include leading several crisis task forces on the former Soviet Union and working nuclear smuggling issues for the DCI's Nonproliferation Center. While at CIA, Ms. Novakoff was selected by the Director of CIA for the prestigious Exceptional Analyst Program. As a result, she spent a year studying Azerbaijani language, and culture and history of the Caucasus. She was also selected as a congressional fellow and worked for Senator Sam Nunn on hearings on terrorism and nuclear smuggling, which resulted in the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici bill. She was the recipient of many awards at CIA including Directorate of Intelligence Award for Customer Focus and one for Collaboration. Ms. Novakoff has been selected as a finalist on two occasions for the South Florida Federal Employee of the Year Award; she also received the Joint Civilian Service Achievement Award from the Department of Defense. Ms. Novakoff is a regular panelist and speaker at academic and other forums on Latin American issues and intelligence issues.